

Risk Factors

Risk and Protective Factors, and Warning Signs

Suicide is an extremely complex interaction involving a number of factors that all contribute to the expression of suicidal behaviors. There are numerous risk factors for suicide, any one of which may be present or absent in an adolescent at-risk for suicide. Researchers have identified a number of factors associated with a higher risk for suicide. Protective factors that may reduce the likelihood of suicidal behavior have also been found.

Suicide does not lend itself easily to an identifiable period of symptoms that occur before the disease...however, research does show that roughly nine out of ten adolescents who die by suicide give clues to others before their suicidal attempt (5). Being able to recognize these clues and knowing the risk factors associated with adolescent suicide may help school staff prevent a student at-risk for suicide from attempting and/or completing suicide. The importance of risk and protective factors can vary by age, gender, and ethnicity (13).

There is no tangible, all encompassing method for determining if an adolescent will attempt or die by suicide. Many students will present some of the factors mentioned in the checklist of risk factors that follow...however, not all will feel, act, or have ideas about suicide. By using this checklist, school administrators and staff may be able to recognize a student at-risk for suicide and who may need help. By recognizing a teen who is potentially at-risk for suicide, staff and administration take the first, and the most important step for alleviating and reducing the risk for suicide. Only after a student has been identified as at risk can he or she get help and intervention, which is of paramount importance for preventing a student from attempting or dying by suicide.

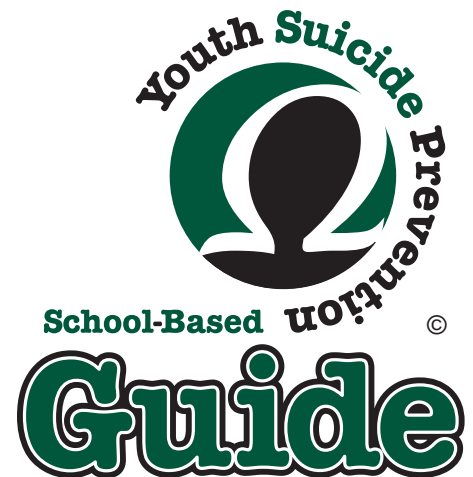
The impact of some risk factors can be reduced by interventions such as providing treatment for depression or substance abuse. Those risk factors that cannot be changed (such as a previous suicide attempt) can alert others to the heightened risk of suicide during periods of the recurrence of a mental or substance abuse disorder, or following a significant stressful life event (11).

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Issue Brief



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Risk and Protective Factors, and...

continued

Research has shown that the following are risk factors for suicide in adolescents: previous suicide attempt or gesture (2,4,6,7,9,10); mood disorder or psychopathology (2,4,7,8,9,10); substance abuse disorder (2,4,7,8,9,10); family history of suicidal behavior or mental illness (4,8,10); relationship, social, work, or financial loss (3,4,8,10); access to firearms (3,4,8,10); contagion or exposure to individuals who have attempted or completed suicide with exposure through media, television, and direct contact (8,10,11); history of physical or sexual abuse (6,7,10); conduct disorder (7,10); juvenile delinquency (7,10); sexual orientation, which has been shown to be correlated with identified risk factors for suicide and is less of a factor after controlling for these risk factors (2,4,8,10); stressful life events (7,10); chronic physical illness (2,4,8); impulsive or aggressive tendencies (3,4); living alone/runaways (7,10); and school problems (2).

Measures that enhance resilience or protective factors are as essential for preventing suicide as reducing the factors that increase risk for suicide.

Positive resistance to suicide is not permanent, so programs that support and maintain protection against suicide should be ongoing (11). The following factors have shown to be protective for suicide: parental/family support and connectedness (2,4,7,11,12), good social/coping skills (11,12), religious/cultural beliefs (2,4,11,12), good relationships with other school youth/best friends (7,12), lack of access to means (10,11), support from relevant adults/teachers/professionals (7,11,12), help-seeking behavior/advice seeking (12), impulse control (7), adaptive problem solving/conflict resolution abilities (11), social integration/opportunities to participate (7,12), positive sense of worth/confidence (7,12), stable environment (7), access to and care for mental/physical/substance disorders (11), responsibility for others/pets (7), and perceived connectedness to school (2).

The following checklist presents risk and protective factors that have been found to be associated with adolescent suicide. This checklist is intended for use by school staff in order to help identify a student who may be at-risk for suicidal behavior.

Risk Factors

- Previous suicide attempt or gesture
- Feelings of hopelessness or isolation
- Psychopathology (depressive disorders/mood disorders)
- Parental psychopathology
- Substance abuse disorder
- Family history of suicidal behavior
- Life stressors such as interpersonal losses (relationship, social, work) and legal or disciplinary problems
- Access to firearms
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Conduct disorders or disruptive behaviors
- Sexual orientation (homosexual, bisexual, and trans-gendered youth)
- Juvenile delinquency
- School and/or work problems
- Contagion or imitation (exposure to media accounts of suicidal behavior and exposure to suicidal behavior in friends or acquaintances)
- Chronic physical illness
- Living alone and/or runaways
- Aggressive-impulsive behaviors

Protective Factors

- Family cohesion (family with mutual involvement, shared interests, and emotional support)
- Good coping skills
- Academic achievement
- Perceived connectedness to the school
- Good relationships with other school youth
- Lack of access to means for suicidal behavior
- Help-seeking behavior/advice seeking
- Impulse control
- Problem solving/conflict resolution abilities
- Social integration/opportunities to participate
- Sense of worth/confidence
- Stable environment
- Access to and care for mental/physical/substance disorders
- Responsibilities for others/pets
- Religiosity (a controversial topic currently)

Warning Signs

continued

Also included is a list of warning signs, which may indicate that the adolescent is thinking about suicide. Again, it must be noted that these factors and warning signs do not provide a definitive method for determining if a student is or is not suicidal, but rather presents a method to help identify potentially suicidal adolescents.

In 1997 the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry adopted a list of symptoms and warning signs for adolescents who may try to kill themselves. The list was updated in November 1998. Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE) has also compiled a list of teen symptoms of depression and warning signs of suicide.

Three state suicide prevention program guideline manuals were consulted and used to update the following list of warning signs: Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program, Washington State's Youth Suicide Prevention Program (YSPP), and the Virginia Guidelines for Suicide Prevention manual. Items from all three lists are combined and appear in this section.

Evidence has shown that approximately nine out of ten adolescents at-risk for suicide will give definite signals that they feel suicidal. The key to prevent suicide is to know these warning signs and know what to do when faced with a student who presents these signs so that they may get the help they need. Many of the symptoms of suicidal feelings are similar to those of depression. Parents and educators should be aware of the following signs adolescents who feel suicidal may express. Many of these signs are similar to the signs for depression. Usually these signs will persist for more than two weeks or more in adolescents potentially at-risk for suicide...however, some youths behave impulsively and act out suicidal behaviors or express suicidal thoughts quickly.

Early Warning Signs

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Preoccupation with death
- Marked personality change and serious mood changes
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulties in school (decline in quality of work)
- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Loss of interest in pleasurable activities
- Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, often related to emotions, such as stomachaches, headaches, fatigue, etc.
- Persistent boredom
- Loss of interest in things one cares about

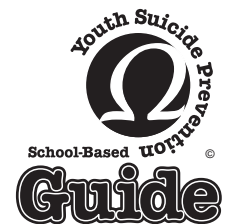
Late Warning Signs

- Actually talking about suicide or a plan
- Exhibiting impulsivity such as violent actions, rebellious behavior, or running away
- Refusing help, feeling "beyond help"
- Complaining of being a bad person or feeling "rotten inside"
- Making statements about hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness.
- Not tolerating praise or rewards
- Giving verbal hints with statements such as: "I won't be a problem for you much longer," "Nothing matters," "It's no use," and "I won't see you again"
- Becoming suddenly cheerful after a period of depression-this may mean that the student has already made the decision to escape all problems by ending his/her life
- Giving away favorite possessions
- Making a last will and testament
- Saying other things like: "I'm going to kill myself," "I wish I were dead," or "I shouldn't have been born."

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